

English SCE

5 September 2014

Proposal: The Queer Woman in Contemporary Drama

Investigating the ways by which the queer woman makes herself heard through dramatic text, I will identify the Aristotelian dramatic form as one too heteronormative to render the lesbian character with agency. Instead, playwrights must queer theatrical conventions and so expand the notion of “the subject” in order to successfully express the queer woman in contemporary drama.

I will begin this investigation by examining Aristotelian dramatic conventions. After establishing those conventions I will explore previous inadequate representations of lesbian themes in plays such as Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*. Part of this explanation will be to discuss the apparent lack of lesbian characters and themes in a contemporary dramatic landscape that still operates on the basis of Aristotelian modes. The issue I intend to take is not so much in Aristotelian dramatic conventions themselves but that few contemporary dramatic texts have pursued new dramatic forms in which to render more successfully the queer woman.

To establish a time range for my research and subsequent analysis, I will discuss the texts of Karen Finley and Holly Hughes. I am interested in their work as such that represents lesbian themes and identities successfully. Moreover, I will research the controversy of these texts as it pertains to the National Endowment for the Arts funding revocation in what became known as the NEA 4. I intend to uncover through research which is the more offensive to heteronormative American theatre audiences: a dramatic form that somehow queers the Aristotelian structure or an Aristotelian structure that attempts to include the queer subject.

After establishing the necessity of a dramatic form that abandons the Aristotelian dictates, I will endeavor to discuss innovations in these dramatic conventions that will allow for more

varied lesbian representation in contemporary drama. Here, I am interested in the ways that queer female playwrights such as Carolyn Gage expand our notions of “the subject” in a way that more masculine narrative modes do not. The obscurity of successful dramatic representations of lesbian themes also interests me as a point of research.

The genesis of this thesis idea occurred when I took Dr. Hall’s course on Queer Literature this past spring. During the class, I studied and discussed successful and damaging representations of lesbian characters as seen in a variety of literary forms. Our discussion of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* particularly reinforced a tension with which I have previously wrestled in my studies as a drama major: why does contemporary drama fail to render queer women when it has found successful ways of rendering queer men?

In anticipation for my English SCE, I used the final project of Dr. Hall’s course to create an annotated bibliography of primary and secondary sources related to this proposed idea. Additionally, I used this summer to attend numerous theatrical productions that featured dramatic texts that queered either form or subject. In the spirit of a liberal arts education, moreover, my studies as a drama major have afforded me a strong basis for identifying conventions and examples of Aristotelian drama. Rather than focus on the theatrical production of pertinent dramas, I endeavor to use my English thesis to examine the dramatic text itself, identifying form as the critical factor in successfully rendering the queer female character.

Tentative Bibliography

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Writing Sample

For Better or For Worse:

The Marriage Plots of Bianca and Hermia

Women of the 16th century lived in a society that expected them to serve as dutiful wives and mothers, regardless of their personal preferences. William Shakespeare nevertheless acknowledged that individual desires motivated women. In his comedies *the Taming of the Shrew* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare represents women as strong individuals able to work for their own agendas. In the former, Bianca is the daughter of Baptista, younger sister of Katherine, and ultimately chooses Lucentio for her husband. In the latter, Hermia's father expects her to marry Demetrius whom Hermia refuses in favor of Lysander. Moreover, Bianca and Hermia understand the expectation to secure a husband but ultimately use marriage to achieve their own goals. For Bianca, marriage will provide her freedom from her sister and father and also allow her to abandon the feminine modesties required to catch a man. For Hermia, marriage to Lysander will secure her love with a legal bond beyond her father's authority. Although both women wed their chosen men, the pursuit of marriage encourages Hermia's best qualities while rendering Bianca a conniving shrew.

Though their society expects quiet obedience from Bianca and Hermia, both women use their voices to express some opinion on their current situations. While Theseus reminds Hermia that she must adhere to her father's preference for Demetrius, for example, Hermia tells Theseus, "I would my father looked but with my eyes" (*Midsummer*.I.i.88). Rather than submit herself to the Duke's advice, Hermia expresses ingratitude for her father's wishes, reflecting the urgency of her love. Bianca, on the other hand, proceeds more shrewdly. For example, when Baptista instructs Bianca on how to handle her suitors, Baptista replies, "Sir, to your pleasure humbly I subscribe" (*Taming*.I.i.82) and thus assures her father she is fully obedient. Bianca's subservience to men, however, is only an act as she proves when juggling her suitors away from

her father's eyes. When Lucentio and Hortensio bicker over the structure of her lessons, for example, Bianca tells them, "Why, gentlemen, you do me doubly wrong/ To strive for that which resteth in my choice" (*Taming*.III.i.16-17). Though Bianca knows better than to speak so openly in front of her father, she voices her opinion in order to control her suitors whom she knows want something from her. Hermia, meanwhile, speaks without hidden purpose, telling her father, "I know not by what power I am made bold," (*Midsommer*.I.i.61) but she must announce her love for Lysander. Although both women prove themselves capable of independent speech, Bianca does so with calculation for circumstance and audience whereas Hermia speaks with benevolence and respect for her elders. As such, Hermia is merely earnest, but Bianca's speech renders her shrewish.

In addition to paternal expectations, Hermia and Bianca face several risks in regard to marriage. If Hermia does not consent to marry Demetrius, she will face either death or a lifetime in a nunnery. Bianca, meanwhile, will endure continued oppression from both sister and father with little opportunity for freedom. In response to these risks, both women speak bravely to defend their desires. When Theseus informs Hermia of her fate if she does not marry Demetrius, for example, Hermia declares,

So will I grow, so live, so die, my lord,
Ere I will yield my virgin patent up
Unto his lordship whose unwished yoke
My soul consents not to give sovereignty. (*Midsommer*.I.i.81-84)

Not only does Hermia understand the consequences of her disobedience, but she publicly accepts them rather than willingly part from her love. Bianca also resists the assumed authority of men, though she does not face death. When Lucentio and Hortensio argue about which subject Bianca

should learn first, Bianca tells them, "I'll not be tied to hours, nor 'pointed times/ But learn my lessons as I please myself" (*Taming*.III.i.19-20). Unlike Hermia who speaks to defend herself and her lover, Bianca speaks to defend solely herself. To her father and to his society, she presents herself as submissive, but in truth she recognizes her feminine power and will defend that power in even seemingly inconsequential circumstances such as scheduling lessons.

Often rejecting the demands of men in pursuit of their goals, Bianca and Hermia act so as to secure their own goals rather than to please their fathers. For example, when Hortensio and Lucentio make advances while tutoring Bianca, she defers their attempts and instead regards them with wariness until she knows them better. Bianca does not fall prey to romantic sentiments but proceeds cautiously in order to protect herself. She is not so keen to marry that she will accept the first offer but will marry so as to best please herself. Hermia similarly seeks to please herself when she agrees to run away with Lysander instead of marrying Demetrius. Because Hermia roots her decisions in love, she is willing to defy her father's wishes in pursuit of her own. Moreover, when Lysander professes love for Helena, Hermia pursues him in order to regain the desires of her heart. Though Hermia rebels in order to defend her love, Bianca rebels against the possibility of wifedom, speaking solely to defend herself. She rejects the authority of her husband merely because she does not wish to submit herself to anyone but herself. At this comparison, Bianca's independent actions may impress her audience but they ultimately look shallow next to Hermia (and her sister, Katherine) who acts on behalf of, not only herself, but her love.

Hermia eventually abandons her modesties to attack Helena when she assumes her friend has stolen Lysander's affections. Immediately rejecting the possibility that Lysander willingly transferred his affections from Hermia to Helena, Hermia accuses Helena and attempts to harm

her. Hermia's anger reflects the sincerity of her affection toward Lysander, but Bianca's spite only reveals her shallow regard for marriage. When her husband summons her, for example, Bianca refuses to come. Bianca has married not to bond herself with a man but to serve her own needs. In comparison, Hermia's defense of her desires posits her as an amorous woman rather than the self-serving manipulator Bianca proves herself to be.

As reflected in the ways Bianca and Hermia overreact to disappointment, both women are accustomed to being liberally regarded for their beauty. Bianca's father and suitors consider her especially precious in comparison to Katherine. Upon meeting both sisters, for example, Lucentio tells Tranio, "in the other's silence do I see/ Maid's mild behavior and sobriety" (*Taming*.I.i.71-72). Unlike Katherine whom Baptista will match to the first interested suitor, Bianca maintains her ability to choose her suitor by acting modest. In this way, Bianca avoids her father's control by putting on an act of subservience. Though Hermia possesses similar beauty to Bianca, her beauty holds no power over her father's decisions. Speaking with a duke's authority on behalf of Egeus, for instance, Theseus commands Hermia, "fair Hermia, look you arm yourself/ To fit your fancies to your father's will" (*Midsommer*.I.i.119-120). He acknowledges her beauty but refuses to indulge Hermia's professed love for Lysander. As such, Hermia does not learn to manipulate others with her beauty as Bianca does.

Nevertheless, Hermia's beauty like Bianca's causes misery to those women nearest to them, Helena and Katherine. When Baptista scolds Katherine for tormenting Bianca, for example, Katherine mocks her father, saying, "She is your treasure, she must have a husband,/ I must dance barefoot on her wedding day" (*Taming*.II.i.35-36). Baptista neglects Katherine because he favors Bianca. Aware of her father's unbalanced affections, Bianca manipulates him against Katherine rather than acknowledge Katherine's better qualities. Hermia similarly causes Helena

shame, as Helena tells herself, “Through Athens I am thought as fair as she./ But what of that? Demetrius thinks not so” (*Midsommer*.I.i.233-235). Hermia involuntarily denies Helena of her love because Demetrius so favors Hermia. Unlike Bianca, Hermia does not allow ridicule to befall Helena but instead assures Helena that she has no interest in Demetrius. Bianca, however, acknowledges Katherine’s suffering only to exploit it.

Because Hermia and Bianca occur in two of Shakespeare’s comedies, the audience expects both women to meet happy endings. Though Hermia regains Lysander’s love and looks forward to their wedding, Bianca’s story concludes with heightened bitterness toward her husband which stems from her unhappiness in marriage. By comparing two women who experience diverging satisfaction in marriage, Shakespeare comments on the way in which women love. Hermia loves with sincerity, but Bianca uses love for her own ends rather than to secure intimacy with a fellow human. Shakespeare thus observes that a woman may achieve happiness in marriage, so long as she acts out of love rather than ambition.

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